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The Saga Of Eskridge'S Historic Heydays

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Stockyards, Eskridge
kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

THE SAGA OF ESKRIDGE'S HISTORIC HEYDAYS

When William Gallagher traveled from Providence, Rhode Island, to California in 1857, he found a particular area in the Kansas plains to be “beautiful, the water good and pure, the atmosphere healthy and bracing.”

Gallagher concluded that someday he “would see that portion of the country thickly settled.”

Ephraim Sanford, the Santa Fe railroad, and the tallgrass prairie fulfilled Gallagher’s prediction.

A New Yorker, Sanford (b. 1822) was a lawyer, newspaper editor and publisher, and a political activist. In 1848, he spoke before 20,000 people in Buffalo at the Free Soil Party convention, an anti-slavery third party movement devoted to “no more slave states and no more slave territories.” Its members included Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and John Quincy Adams’s grandson. Sanford moved to Kansas in 1857 to support the free state movement, became a colonel during the Civil War, and later served in the state legislature.

In 1868, Sanford purchased 460 acres and laid out “Eskridge” (after his friend Lt. Governor C. V. Eskridge). He built a store, a tavern, and a stage station; published the local paper, *The Landmark*; and practiced law. His 1868 home still stands on the property of the Russell Taylor Ranch in Eskridge. According to A. H. Reynard’s *History of Eskridge*, Sanford unabashedly marketed the vacant town by publishing “maps and plats showing it to be a veritable network of railroads and by giving out information concerning factories, mills, machine shops, and other like industries in operation.” In

1871, Sanford nearly succeeded in moving the county seat from Alma to Eskridge, losing by only nineteen votes. At the time the entire town consisted of Sanford, his wife, and two daughters.

In 1880, the Santa Fe built a line from Burlingame to Alma and platted “East Eskridge,” roughly adjacent to Sanford’s land. When William Gallagher returned in 1884 with his wife and daughter, he found a bustling town of 450 people with a schoolhouse and church, two drug stores, three dry goods stores, two hardware stores, a harness shop, two millinery shops, a boot and shoe store, two grocery stores, and two hotels—the Lawlor House and the Santa Fe House. There was even a “Garden of Eden” subdivision, designed by John Eden.

Sanford’s phantom factories may have lured the early settlers to Eskridge, but the tallgrass prairie gave them reason to stay. Wabaunsee County had among the best grazing pastures in North America, and the cattle business exploded as fast as the railroads could lay track.

Well-educated, well-read, and ambitious young men built a ranching industry that served markets as far away as Chicago. Many were Civil War veterans such as Joseph Lockhart, whose ranch just west of Eskridge became the largest in the county and grazed over 3,000 head. Lockhart’s great-great-grandchildren still own and operate the ranch. Ranchers John Peters, Crow Shumate, and J. Y. Waugh (dubbed

by the *Eskridge Star* as the “Cattle Kings”) formed a partnership and annually traveled to the Spade and Matador ranches in Texas to purchase thousands of cattle to graze in the Flint Hills. The *Star* provided weekly cattle reports. In 1897, 183 train carloads of stock were shipped from the Eskridge depot. In 1898, Wabaunsee County sent to market more cattle than any county in the state. In one three-week period, thirty-three carloads of cattle shipped out of Eskridge.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Eskridge supported over thirty businesses. The creamery could produce 14,000 pounds of butter in a week. The telephone directory listed over one hundred numbers, and a movement grew to build an electric railway from Topeka to Council Grove through Eskridge. By 1907 the business directory listed fifty businesses, including two under the heading “Sells Everything.” The mayor’s platform included “the interurban road, electric lights and waterworks.”

In 1909, the town celebrated the success that Sanford had proclaimed forty years earlier. For three days, over 5,000 people enjoyed the Homecoming in the Park, with a variety of exhibits ranging from horticulture, agriculture, and floriculture to a lady palmist and a seven-foot eight-inch, twenty-two-pound rattlesnake. Attractions included a colt show, horse races, ballgames, and a hot air balloon. Speeches by Senators Curtis and Dolley and



Eskridge After a Devastating Fire
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Governor Stubbs inspired the crowd. Fort Riley’s Seventh Regiment Band provided music. The finale was a grand ball at the Modern Woodmen Association Hall.

A month later a disastrous fire cut short the afterglow of the Homecoming. At 3 a.m., a lamp exploded in the bakery, destroying five businesses in two hours and damaging several others. To save Trusslers Hardware, 200 men dumped four tons of salt and over one hundred barrels of water on the fire. Throughout the night, 500 men and women emptied the contents of the burned buildings onto Main Street. The *Star* reported, “...when daylight began to

dawn, Main Street reminded one of Market Street in Dublin.” It was the fourth, but not the last, fire to devastate Eskridge, and fire was not the only disaster the town suffered. Two years later, a “terrific cyclone” severely damaged half of the town including the high school and two churches, and completely destroyed twenty-five homes. No one was seriously injured. Once again, the town began rebuilding immediately.

By 1911, Eskridge had expanded to over 1,200 residents and seventy-five businesses, including five department stores, six produce houses, a photography gallery, and a piano store. The debt-free town



Christian Church After the Tornado, 1911
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operated its own electric power plant. The town was both a center of commerce and a cultural center for the area. Eskridge had led the effort that established a superior high school system in the county with college credits. The *Star*, one of three local newspapers, boasted 1,800 subscriptions. A 500-seat, open-air “Air Dome” was one of two moving picture theaters. The Opera House continued to thrive, hosting European musicians.

The settlers’ children, raised in a culture of ranching, education, and arts, made Eskridge proud. Joseph Lockhart’s daughter Caroline (b. 1870) had a remarkable career

as an East Coast journalist, then later as a best-selling western novelist and rancher in Cody, Wyoming, and as the owner/ editor of the *Cody Enterprise*. With Buffalo Bill she founded the Cody Stampede. In 2018, Caroline was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame. Hazel Eden (b.1885), daughter of the Garden of Eden’s developer, became a nationally recognized soprano. Trained at the Shakespeare Theater of London, Hazel sang lead soprano with the Boston English Opera Company and the Century English Opera Company. Grace Bowman (b.1888), daughter of one of the Cattle

Kings, attended the Leland Powers Theater School in Boston and operated a successful acting school in Hollywood, training such notables as Mickey Rooney.

When the Great Depression hit, Eskridge newspaperman Frank Frost proposed building a lake as a public works project. Citizens throughout the county petitioned for it. In 1933 barracks were built for 200 men to begin clearing a valley west of town. In 1936, the work force doubled and construction continued around the clock. By the end of spring 1938, Eskridge’s Lake Wabaunsee had filled. During WWII, 150 German prisoners of war lived in the barracks and worked as farm labor throughout the county during the summers of 1944 and 1945. Despite limited security, there were no escape attempts. Many prisoners maintained contact with their “employers” after the war.

Following WWII, Eskridge’s population shrank to 500, but the town still supported dozens of businesses, including a Harvard-trained doctor, three car dealerships, three grocery stores and a butcher, a blacksmith, and a drug store with a soda fountain and a pharmacy. Ranchers Ed Van Petten, Bob Widau, and Wendell Trantor organized the first Eskridge Labor Day Rodeo, a tradition that continues today. On Saturday nights the town bustled with families coming from miles around to socialize. Cars filled both sides and the middle of Main Street.

In July 1960, the town saw an immediate, albeit temporary, population jump. The U.S. Air Force had designated a pasture northeast of Eskridge near Keene to house a seventy-five-foot-tall Atlas rocket with a nuclear warhead that could be dropped with precision 6,000 miles away. Engineers, construction workers, and technicians lived in and around town during the construction. The project was completed in 1961, and the Atlas rocket lay in its “coffin-silo” four years before it was decommissioned.

In the 1960s, the trains quit running, replaced by cattle trucks. More and more residents began commuting to Topeka to work and shop. Local businesses suffered. Today, Eskridge is working to revitalize the spirit of the early years. Young residents are restoring the park and promoting the town as a viable and appealing place to live and raise families.

Bruce Waugh grew up in Eskridge, where his family has lived since 1884. He lives and practices law in Kansas City, Kansas, and relaxes at his home outside Eskridge.